



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT

December 7, 2004

Ms. Julie Joe
Assistant County Attorney
Travis County Transactions Division
P. O. Box 1748
Austin, Texas 78767

OR2004-10368

Dear Ms. Joe:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 214372.

The Travis County Sheriff's Office (the "sheriff") received a request for information pertaining to a specified case. You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure pursuant to sections 552.101 through 552.142 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim.

We note that section 552.301(e) of the Government Code requires that a governmental body that requests an attorney general decision under section 552.301(a) must, within a reasonable time, but not later than the fifteenth business day after the date of receiving the written request, submit to the attorney general, among other items, written comments stating the reasons why the stated exceptions to disclosure apply that would allow the requested information to be withheld from disclosure and a copy of the specific information requested, or representative samples of it if a voluminous amount was requested, labeled to indicate which exceptions apply to which parts of the copy. *See* Gov't Code § 552.301(e). To date, the sheriff has not submitted to us either such written comments or a copy of the requested information for our review. Thus, we find that the sheriff has failed to comply with the procedural requirements of section 552.301 of the Government Code in requesting this decision from us.

Because the sheriff failed to comply with the procedural requirements of section 552.301 with regard to the requested information, it is now presumed public. *See id.* § 552.302; *see also Hancock v. State Bd. of Ins.*, 797 S.W.2d 379 (Tex. App.—Austin 1990, no writ); *City of Houston v. Houston Chronicle Publ'g Co.*, 673 S.W.2d 316, 323 (Tex. App.—Houston

[1st Dist.] 1984, no writ); Open Records Decision No. 319 (1982). The sheriff must demonstrate a compelling interest in order to overcome this presumption. Normally, a compelling interest is demonstrated when some other source of law makes the requested information confidential or third party interests are at stake. See Open Records Decision No. 150 at 2 (1977). Although the sheriff claims that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101 through 552.142 of the Government Code, we note that discretionary exceptions to disclosure do not constitute compelling interests that are sufficient to overcome the existing presumption that the requested information is now public.¹ Further, we note that we have no basis for concluding that any portion of the requested information is confidential by law because the sheriff failed to submit any portion of the requested information to us for our review. Consequently, we conclude that the sheriff must release the entirety of the requested information to the requestor.

However, we caution the sheriff that section 552.352 of the Government Code imposes criminal penalties for the release of confidential information. See Gov't Code § 552.352. Prior to releasing the requested information, the sheriff should ensure that it does not contain any such confidential information. If the sheriff believes that any portion of the requested information is indeed confidential and may not lawfully be released, it must challenge this ruling in court as outlined below.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular records at issue in this request and limited to the facts as presented to us; therefore, this ruling must not be relied upon as a previous determination regarding any other records or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For example, governmental bodies are prohibited from asking the attorney general to reconsider this ruling. Gov't Code § 552.301(f). If the governmental body wants to challenge this ruling, the governmental body must appeal by filing suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such an appeal, the governmental body must file suit within 10 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.353(b)(3), (c). If the governmental body does not appeal this ruling and the governmental body does not comply with it, then both the requestor and the attorney general have the right to file suit against the governmental body to enforce this ruling. *Id.* § 552.321(a).

¹ Discretionary exceptions are intended to protect only the interests of the governmental body, as distinct from exceptions which are intended to protect information deemed confidential by law or the interests of third parties. See, e.g., Open Records Decision Nos. 630 at 4 (1994) (governmental body may waive attorney-client privilege, section 552.107(1)), 551 (1990) (statutory predecessor to section 552.103 serves only to protect governmental body's position in litigation and does not itself make information confidential), 522 at 4 (1989) (discretionary exceptions in general), 473 (1987) (governmental body may waive statutory predecessor to section 552.111); see also *Dallas Area Rapid Transit v. Dallas Morning News*, 4 S.W.3d 469, 475-76 (Tex. App.—Dallas 1999, no pet.) (governmental body may waive section 552.103). Discretionary exceptions, therefore, generally do not constitute compelling interests under section 552.301 of the Government Code.

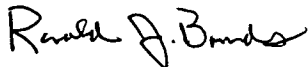
If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, within 10 calendar days of this ruling, the governmental body will do one of the following three things: 1) release the public records; 2) notify the requestor of the exact day, time, and place that copies of the records will be provided or that the records can be inspected; or 3) notify the requestor of the governmental body's intent to challenge this letter ruling in court. If the governmental body fails to do one of these three things within 10 calendar days of this ruling, then the requestor should report that failure to the attorney general's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at (877) 673-6839. The requestor may also file a complaint with the district or county attorney. *Id.* § 552.3215(e).

If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can appeal that decision by suing the governmental body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Texas Dep't of Pub. Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.—Austin 1992, no writ).

Please remember that under the Act the release of information triggers certain procedures for costs and charges to the requestor. If records are released in compliance with this ruling, be sure that all charges for the information are at or below the legal amounts. Questions or complaints about over-charging must be directed to Hadassah Schloss at the Texas Building and Procurement Commission at (512) 475-2497.

If the governmental body, the requestor, or any other person has questions or comments about this ruling, they may contact our office. We note that a third party may challenge this ruling by filing suit seeking to withhold information from a requestor. Gov't Code § 552.325. Although there is no statutory deadline for contacting us, the attorney general prefers to receive any comments within 10 calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely,



Ronald J. Bounds
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

RJB/krl

Ref: ID# 214372

c: Ms. Jie/Cheryl Zhang
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Pflugerville, Texas 78660
(w/o enclosures)